

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 5157

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PN, PQ

SUBJECT: TORRIJOS ON CANAL AND CONSPIRACY

SUMMARY: DURING PRESS CONFERENCE IN MADRID SEPT. 20, GENERAL TORRIJOS SPOKE OUT ON CANAL ISSUE, CHARGED U.S. INSTIGATION OF CAMPAIGN TO DISCREDIT GOP AND GIVE CREDENCE TO REPORTS THAT U.S. OFFICIALS HAD CONSIDERED HIS ASSASSINATION. END SUMMARY.

1. PANAMANIAN PAPERS SEPT. 21 CARRY BOTH AP AND EFE ACCOUNTS OF COMMENTS MADE BY GENERAL TORRIJOS DURING A PRESS CONFERENCE IN MADRID ON SEPT. 20. MAJOR ATTENTION IN AP ARTICLE IS ACCORDED TO THE GENERAL'S REMARKS ON THE CANAL WHILE EFE GIVES PRIORITY TO HIS STATEMENTS REGARDING AN ALLEGED CAMPAIGN TO DISCREDIT THE GOP AND REPORTED U.S. CONSIDERATION OF PLANS TO ASSASSINATE HIM.

2. ON THE CANAL ISSUE, TORRIJOS TOLD HIS INTERVIEWERS THAT THE WATERWAY IS A "TIME BOMB SET IN THE HEART OF PANAMA." HE STATED THAT "OUR COUNTRY HAS NOT LEASED THE CANAL TO THE UNITED STATES" AND ASSERTED
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THAT THE CANAL ZONE "IS OCCUPIED BY A FLAG, A SYSTEM OF

JUSTICE AND AN ARMY THAT IS ALIEN." PANAMANIAN YOUTH IS NATIONALISTIC, HE WENT ON, "BECAUSE IT IS THEIR NATIONALISM THAT HAS BEEN MOST OFFERED BY A FOREIGN SYSTEM OF JUSTICE," ADDING THAT "MY EYES FILL WITH TEARS EVERY TIME I SEE A PANAMANIAN ARRESTED BY A SYSTEM OF JUSTICE WHICH IS NOT HIS OWN." TORRIJOS MAINTAINED THAT PANAMA UNDERSTANDS THAT THE CANAL IS "AT THE SERVICE OF THE WORLD'S MERCHANT FLEET" AND THAT IT CANNOT BE PUT TO PANAMA'S EXCLUSIVE USE, BUT CHARGED THAT "THE PRICE WE ARE PAYING IS EXCESSIVELY HIGH." REAFFIRMING THAT ANY NEW TREATY WITH THE U.S. MUST BE SUBMITTED TO A PLEBISCITE, THE GENERAL OBSERVED THAT "THIS HAS MADE PEOPLE FEEL EASIER." REGARDING A NEW TREATY, TORRIJOS STATED PANAMA WOULD "NOT NEGOTIATE HER SOVEREIGNTY." COMMENTING ON THE NEGOTIATIONS, HE OBSERVED THAT UNTIL THE SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING IN PANAMA AND INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY WITH PANAMA'S CAUSE PROPELLED THE TALKS TO THE "STATUS THEY MERIT," THE U.S. HAD THE MATTER BURIED IN THE BOWELS OF THE STATE DEPARTMENT.

3. IN RESPONSE TO A QUESTION WHETHER THE CIA HAD PLANNED HIS ASSASSINATION, TORRIJOS REMARKED THAT "IN WATERGATE, WHERE A NUMBER OF PERSONS HAVE COME INTO THE LIMELIGHT, A SMALL PART ALSO BEFELL ME," ADDING THAT "IT APPEARS THAT IT (THE ASSASSINATION PLOT) WAS SAID BY DEAN." HE REPORTEDLY FOLLOWED THIS WITH THE COMMENT THAT "WE LEARNED THAT THERE WAS A PERSON IN MEXICO ASSIGNED TO KILL ME. THEY THOUGHT BY DOING AWAY WITH TORRIJOS, PANAMA'S REVOLUTION WOULD BE OVER. BUT THE REVOLUTION IS AN IRREVERSIBLE FACT. WITH OR WITHOUT TORRIJOS, IT WILL GO FORWARD. HE ASSERTED THAT THE GOP HAD ATTEMPTED TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE ASSASSINATION PLOT BUT THAT IT HAD NOT BEEN EASY. WHEN A REPLY WAS RECEIVED, HE CLAIMED, IT WAS TO THE EFFECT THAT THE POSSIBILITY HAD BEEN CONSIDERED "BY LOWER ECHELONS IN THE STATE DEPARTMENT." THIS, HE SAID, LEFT HIM EVEN MORE CONCERNED SINCE IF SUCH A DECISION WERE LEFT TO LOWER LEVELS, IT MEANT "MY LIFE WAS WORTH MUCH LESS."

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4. EXPANDING ON THE SUBJECT, TORRIJOS CHARGED THAT TOGETHER WITH THE PLOT AGAINST HIS LIFE A CAMPAIGN WAS LAUNCHED TO DISCREDIT THE GOVERNMENT OF PANAMA, WHICH IS A SERIOUS MATTER BECAUSE THE DAMAGE PRECEDES THE CONSPIRACY." THE THRUST OF THE ANTI-GOP EFFORT, ACCORDING TO TORRIJOS, WAS TO HAVE THE WORLD BELIEVE THAT THE GOVERNMENT WAS INVOLVED IN INTERNATIONAL DRUG TRAFFIC, THAT THE GOP WANTED TO TURN THE CANAL OVER TO

THE SOCIALIST POWERS, AND THAT PANAMA WOULD RAISE CANAL TOLLS "INCONSIDERATELY." "THESE", HE WAS QUOTED AS SAYING, "ARE ALL TYPICAL ANTECEDENTS TO A PLOT" AND HAD LED HIM TO STRENGTHEN PROTECTIVE MEASURES FOR HIGH-LEVEL GOP OFFICIALS.

5. ON THE OTHER TOPICS, THE GENERAL STATED HE WAS CALLING AT THE VATICAN BECAUSE "THE POPE HAS GIVEN WARM SUPPORT TO OUR CAUSE" AND FOR THIS REASON HE WAS OBLIGED "TO EXPRESS THANKS." HE SAID PERON'S RETURN TO POWER IN ARGENTINA "REPRESENTS A HOPE" FOR LATIN AMERICA BECAUSE PERON SUPPORTS SOCIAL CHANGE. REFERRING TO EVNETS IN CHILE, HE NOTED THAT PANAMA WAS CONTINUING NORMAL RELATIONS (PANAMA 5138) BUT OPINED THAT ALLENDE'S FALL WOULD LEAD TO MORE VIOLENCE IN THE HEMISPHERE. WHILE STATING LATIN AMERICAN PEOPLES ARE NOT EXTREMISTS AND BELIEVE MORE IN DEEDS THAN SLOGANS, TORRRIJOS OBSERVED THAT LATIN AMERICA IS DIVIDED INTO CONTENDING FORCES OF THE RIGHT AND LEFT. OF THESE, HE SAID, "I CONSIDER MORE ACCEPTABLE THE SUBVERSION OF THE LEFT, IN WHICH THERE IS MORE IDEALISM, THAN THAT OF THE RIGHT, IN WHICH THERE IS MORE SELFISHNESS."

6. COMMENT: WHILE TORRRIJOS' COMMENTS ON THE CANAL ISSUE COVER OLD GROUND, THEY ARE ANOTHER REFLECTION OF HIS STRONG FEELINGS, ESPECIALLY ON THE QUESTION OF JURISDICTION. HIS REMARKS CONCERNING U.S. CONSPIRACY TO DISCREDIT PANAMA AND DO AWAY WITH HIM PERSONALLY, ASIDE FROM THEIR NEWSWORTHINESS FOR A EUROPEAN AUDIENCE, REFLECT HIS SENSITIVITY ON THIS SCORE AND HIS KNOWN INCLINATION TO BELIEVE SUCH ALLEGATIONS. SARYE

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